

Semiotics Research in Vietnam

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ABSTRACT: The semiotic theory was introduced and applied in Vietnam quite early. However, the application of semiotic theory to the study of literary works has not had many great successes. In particular, the semiotic approach takes place in different ways: from linguistics, literary criticism, folklore, culturology. The article starts from the point of view Ferdinand de Saussure, language is a system of signs, and linguistics is a part of semiotics, language is a special sign system, each linguistic sign always has two sides, the signifier (sound image, phonetic) and the signified (concept, meaning) and based on the “triadic model semiotic theory” of Charles Sanders Pierce.

The article mainly reviews of semiotic research in Vietnam to see that the application of semiotic theory to the study of many fields including literature has not had a unified approach and has not outlined a clear and consistent theoretical framework to operate it effectively, especially since there is a quite clear distinction between the methods of semiotics approaches from the point of view of structural semiotics and post-structural semiotics on application domains: linguistic semiotics, cultural semiotics, and literary semiotics. The sign system in literary works is conceived by us as aesthetic signs with symbolic value, which are signs-symbols expressed through different levels such as the world of artistic words, icons, symbols, and archetypes.

KEYWORDS: *semiotics, sign, symbol, two-sign model, triadic sign model.*

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I. Introduction

The semiotic theory was introduced and applied in Vietnam quite early. However, the application of semiotic theory to the study of literary works has not had many great successes. In particular, the semiotic approach takes place in different ways: from linguistics, literary criticism, folklore, culturology. Differences may prove inconsistent understanding between applied concepts and terms: signal, sign (dấu hiệu, kí hiệu, tín hiệu); literary semiotics and semiotics in literature; semiotics in linguistics and signs in languages; cultural semiotics and semiotics in culture. Since then, the object and research scope of semiotics do not have overlapping boundaries. In Vietnam, problems of semiotics, especially the theory of aesthetic signs, have been applied since the 70s of the twentieth century. It is possible to point out two directions of semiotic research as follows:

II. Approaches to semiotics in Vietnam

2.1. Approaching semiotics in the direction of linguistic structuralism

The theory of semiotics is closely associated with structuralism in linguistic research and anthropology of the twentieth century. In 1916, Ferdinand de Saussure with *Course in General Linguistics* (Saussure, 1916, 2005) was considered the father of modern linguistics and one of the founders of structuralism, then the attention was drawn to the role of semiotics.

Ferdinand de Saussure's thesis proposes that language is a system of signs, and linguistics is a part of semiotics. According to Ferdinand de Saussure, language is a special sign system, each linguistic sign always has two sides, the signifier (sound image, phonetic) and the signified (concept, meaning). There is an arbitrary, linear, hierarchical, and multivalued relationship between them. Hierarchy and multi-values are the premises for the formation of all kinds of symbolic signs in literary works. Language activities take place on two axes of association and axes of selection, which is also a premise to explain association and creative activities in later literature. The theory of linguistic signs, the two sides semiotics of Ferdinand de Saussure (a sign as being composed of a ‘signifier’ (*signifiant*) and a ‘signified’ (*signifié*)) is considered the premise for further semiotic studies, especially by Roman Jakobson and Roland Barthes.

Roman Jakobson (Jakobson, 2008) mentioned the “poetic function” and the multifunctionality of language in communication activities. The discussion about the poetic function and the aesthetic functionary

was built into the theory of poetics; the multifunctionality of language in communication activities helps to fully explain the mechanism of linguistic signs through six factors such as code, channel, and transmitter, receiver, transmitter, and message. The operation of these six factors in this communication gives rise to 6 different functions of language according to the semiotic mechanism. Roman Jakobson is considered one of the great names that laid the foundation for the school of structural semiotics. Studies on poetic language, especially Charles Baudelaire's *Cats*, became the epitome of a structural approach to poetic language.

From a different perspective, Roland Barthes (Barthes, 1965, 2020) constructed the theory of "denotative semiotics and connotative semiotics" in the study of the literary symbolic/symbolic world. Descriptive semiotics is considered the basic semantic layer, which is natural language notation; and functional semiotics is the second layer of meaning, symbolic meaning, and implicit meaning. Literary semiotics are functional semiotics and meta-semiotics. This point of view is used to explain the mechanism of aesthetic sign formation received by Vietnamese linguists in the study of literary language. Roland Barthes' semiotic theory later was developed in the direction of deconstruction, reflected in the studies of myth, the author's death, etc. In particular, living at the same time as Ferdinand de Saussure, Charles Sanders Peirce (John Dewey, 1946) did not influence the Swiss linguist's theory of two sides semiotics, but he constructed the "triadic model semiotic theory". Peirce offered a triadic (three-part) model consisting of:

1. The *representamen*: the form which the sign takes (not necessarily material, though usually interpreted as such) – called by some theorists the 'sign vehicle'.
2. An *interpretant*: not an interpreter but rather the *sense* made of the sign.
3. An *object*: something beyond the sign to which it refers (a *referent*)

(Daniel Chandler (2007), pp.29)

According to the triadic model semiotic theory, Charles Sanders Peirce added a third factor to the semiotic model, that is the interpretation, in addition to the two expressive and signified planes of the sign. Ferdinand de Saussure examined universal language, paying little attention to the role of individual use (speech), but Charles Sanders Peirce paid attention to personal experience in sign perception. The three-sided semiotic view of Charles Sanders Peirce was later concretized by Charles W. Morris into three aspects of semiotics and is commonly applied in post-structural linguistics: syntax, semantics, and pragmatics.

In a different approach when developing and applying Ferdinand de Saussure's view of linguistic signs, Yuri M. Lotman (Lotman, 1990, 2015), a great name in the Tartu-Moscow School of semiotics, developed the theory of "cultural semiotics" in decoding the language of linguistic works of art. Two works of this famous researcher have been translated into Vietnamese. Perspectives on artistic language, artistic conventions, semiotics, etc set up a different understanding of the text, about the world of cultural symbols in the work of word art.

In Vietnam, the application of structural semiotic theory by researchers around the world was very early. The works that are considered as the beginning of the tendency to study literary language from the semiotic point of view are mainly in the direction of structural semiotics, first of all, the typical work: The treatise *From Semiotics to Poetics* (Hoang Trinh, 1992) has initially applied semiotic theory to decipher the language of lullabies and poetic language. It can be said that the commentaries on the sign, the meaning of the sign, the signifier, and the signified of the sign in the treatise have made pioneering contributions to the application of semiotics in literature, since then forming poetics in relation to semiotics in poetry.

Notably, the theory of aesthetic signals through *Những luận điểm về cách tiếp cận ngôn ngữ các sự kiện văn* (Arguments on the linguistic approach to literary events) by Do Huu Chau, 1990) is considered the first work that raises the problem of studying literary language from the theory of aesthetic signals. According to the author, these are signals with reason, symbolization, and aesthetic value. From the author's way of posing this problem, there are many research works that have followed the direction of aesthetic signals in literary language. It can be said that the author's approach to the aesthetic signal is most clearly influenced by Roland Barthes' theory of indicative semiotics and functional semiotics. The work *Ngôn ngữ với sáng tạo và tiếp nhận văn học* (Language with literary creation and reception) (Nguyen Lai, 1998) does not claim to receive literature from semiotic theory but the interpretations of the treatise on figurative language with creativity. Poetry, layers of figurative meanings in literary works, etc. have also shown that the mechanism of formation and operation of literary signs is the translation of meaning, creating meaning as a mechanism of co-reception and co-creation. Following the aesthetic signal theory, the thesis *Sự biểu đạt bằng ngôn ngữ các tín hiệu thẩm mỹ không gian trong ca dao* (The linguistic expression of spatial aesthetic signals in folk songs) (Truong Thi Nhan, 1995) deciphered the world of ancient folk art successfully transmit spatial signals through the signifier-language system of aesthetic cues. This is the first thesis to successfully study folk art from the perspective of aesthetic signal theory. With this approach, many theses have applied the study of different literary genres. Works *Ngôn ngữ với văn chương* (Language with literature) (Bui Minh Toan, 2012), and *Tín hiệu thẩm mỹ trong văn chương* (aesthetic signal in literature) (Mai Thi Kieu Phuong,) are two of the few treatises dedicated to the interpretation of aesthetic signals in literature systematically. The concretization of these two treatises is greatly influenced by the theory of aesthetic signal initiated by Do Huu Chau, showing a certain convincing position of

the theory of aesthetic signal in the study of literary language. From the theory of aesthetic signals, our own studies such as *Tìm hiểu mối quan hệ giữa ngôn ngữ với tín hiệu thẩm mỹ trong tác phẩm văn học* (Exploring the relationship between language and aesthetic signals in literary works) (Tran Van Sang, 2004), *Hệ thống tín hiệu thẩm mỹ - sóng đôi trong ca dao* (System of aesthetic double signals - in folk songs in the light of semiotic theory) (Tran Van Sang, 2016) have shown the working mechanism of aesthetic signals -parallel and the representation of aesthetic signals in literature with the reflection of perceived cultural characteristics through the symbolic world, the symbolic world.

In addition to the works directly related to the theory of semiotics and literary aesthetic signals mentioned above, the studies on poetic language and literary language from the stylistic point of view have also made contributions to interpreting figurative language, and the rhetorical meaning of signs in literary works: *Phân tích phong cách ngôn ngữ trong tác phẩm văn học* (Analysis of linguistic styles in literary works) (Do Viet Hung, 2004), *Ngôn ngữ văn chương* (Literary language) (Hoang Kim Ngoc, 2011). The common point of these works is that they do not declare research from semiotic theory but follow a stylistic approach such as analyzing words, images, images, poetry, etc. in literature, thereby highlighting acquire the properties of literary word signs such as multi-meaning, symbolism, etc. The above-mentioned issues were systematically mentioned by semiotic researchers.

According to our observations, approaching semiotics in the direction of linguistic structuralism, the most remarkable trend, is still the way of deciphering poetry and folk songs in the light of aesthetic signal theory. This approach has been actively benefited by linguists and has achieved certain achievements in interpreting a literary language from a semiotic point of view.

2.2. Approaching semiotics in the direction of post-structuralism in literary research

In the line of post-structural semiotics can be mentioned the interpretive semiotic theory of Umberto Eco through *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (Umberto Eco, 1986), semiotics and interpretation of Thomas A. Sebeok (*Semiotics and Interpretation*, 1982), intertextual theory by Julia Kristeva, etc. These are remarkable works, showing different semiotic directions in how to read and decipher literary works from a post-structuralist perspective.

The studies followed by the post-structural semiotics, as we observe, come mainly from the studies of literary theorists-criticisms. The birth of post-structural linguistics has expanded the object and research areas of structural linguistics, attaching importance to the role of the relationship of language with its users and the cognitive culture of the community speaking that language. In the field of semiotics, the birth of post-structural linguistic theories and post-structural critical theories form deconstructive semiotic schools. In recent years, Vietnamese researchers have had a number of semiotic works published in the direction of post-structuralism applied to the study of literary language. Mai Thi Hong Tuyet (2106) has applied foreign semiotic theories to study literary images as signs: *Hình tượng văn học như là kí hiệu* (Literary images as signs). This is a new interpretation because, in traditional criticism, images are not considered signs in literary works.

Trinh Ba Dinh and a team of collaborators from the Institute of Literature (2017) have collected articles and translations related to semiotic theory through the treatise *Từ kí hiệu đến biểu tượng* (From signal to symbol). The semiotic line that the research team identified is cultural semiotics through the symbolic system. Semiotics in the treatise, in our opinion, is the theory of trends in symbolic research, thereby applying symbolic decoding in some works of *Mẫu thượng ngàn* by Nguyen Xuan Khanh, *mã nhan đề* in Hoang Cam's poetry, the "water" and "fire" symbols in Vietnamese films, etc. Along with the approach from symbol theory, Dinh Hong Hai's work (2014) is considered an in-depth study of symbols from a theoretical perspective, the Approach models and perspectives are applied in cultural and literary studies.

Author Le Huy Bac (2019) has diligently researched semiotics from the inter-semiotic level to decipher the literary language. This line of research is clearly demonstrated through two treatises on *Ký hiệu học văn học* (Literary semiotics) (Le Huy Bac, 2018), and *Ký hiệu và Liên ký hiệu* (Signs and Inter-signs). The content of these works reflected that is directly related to semiotics. In our opinion, the treatise is the first work to clearly define the concept of literary semiotics in Vietnam, the concept of "inter-signs" in literature, since then it has entered the theoretical world of different levels and levels of research. Research literary notation through experiments: *thời gian trong Đây thôn Vĩ Dạ*, *Thu trong Thu hứng của Đỗ Phủ*, *Liên kí hiệu trong Át cơ của Lê Đạt*, *cổ mẫu trong Chí Phèo*, ...

The treatise on *Phê bình kí hiệu học, đọc văn như là hành trình tái thiết ngôn ngữ* (Semiotic criticism: literary reading as a journey of linguistic reconstruction) by La Nguyen (2018) has shown a way of reading literature from the point of view of cultural semiotics. La Nguyen was influenced by many theories of cultural semiotics of Yuri M. Lotman, so in this work, the experiments in analyzing literary works of Nguyen Tuan, Nam Cao, To Huu, Nguyen Huy Thiep, etc. also see this clearly.

The influence of the study of semiotics in Vietnam has spread thanks to the interest of many researchers and specialties. The publication of Seminar Seminar: *Từ lí thuyết đến ứng dụng trong nghiên cứu và dạy học ngữ văn* (Semiotics: From theory to application in research and teaching literature) organized by the

Hanoi National University of Education (2016) has 75 reports related to semiotics and the application of symbols school in Vietnam. This is the first seminar on semiotics in Vietnam. The issues raised by the presentations have initially introduced and differentiated semiotics from related sciences such as linguistics, culturology, and literature.

Obviously, with the brief overview but certainly not covering the whole picture of semiotics in the world above, the concept of semiotics, the dimension, and the scope of semiotic research have not reached a common consensus, and have not found a voice in the research. As far as possible, Daniel Chandler's approach in *Semiotics: The Basics* (Daniel Chandler, 2007) has circumscribed the area of interest of current semiotics to include includes the following key issues: (1) *introduction*, (2) *models of the sign*, (3) *signs and things*, (4) *analyzing structures*, (5) *challenging the literal*, (6) *codes*, (7) *textual interactions*, (8) *prospect and retrospect*. These contents have covered all issues of semiotics and semiotics in detail, both structural semiotics, and post-structural semiotics. The semiotic theory framed by Daniel Chandler, with the necessary adjustments, will have many points of relevance to the analysis and decipherment of the sign system in the relation to language in current literature.

III. Conclusion

Reviewing the overview of semiotic research in Vietnam to see that the application of semiotic theory to the study of many fields including literature has not had a unified approach and has not outlined a clear and consistent theoretical framework to operate it effectively, especially since there is a quite clear distinction between the methods of semiotics approaches from the point of view of structural semiotics and post-structural semiotics on application domains: linguistic semiotics, cultural semiotics, and literary semiotics. In Vietnam, separate studies applying semiotic theories to study literary language in a particular author and genre are not really many, but mainly individual studies of the theory and/or certain aspects of semiotics. With an interdisciplinary approach to language and literature, we focus on establishing intersectional boundaries in semiotic research, especially literary semiotics through levels of literary semiotics and some typical literary genres. From an interdisciplinary approach to language and literature, we analyze and describe semiotic aspects through a number of literary works. The sign system in literary works is conceived by us as aesthetic signs with symbolic value, which are signs-symbols expressed through different levels such as the world of artistic words, icons, symbols, and archetypes.

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